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SUBJECT: TROUBLING INDICATIONS THAT FIJI'S INTERIM GOVERNMENT MAY
HAVE NO ELECTION PLANS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: There are troubling indications that Fiji's Interim Government (IG) has no plans for elections in the near term.

A key member of the NCBBF today told the media that some of the reforms envisioned in the draft Peoples Charter may take up to twelve years to implement. PM Bainimarama will personally direct the reform process from a new "Constitutionally created" Peoples Charter Council to be based in his office. Meanwhile, most of Fiji's political parties and the Methodist church have reiterated their stance against the NCBBF process and the proposed reforms. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Head of the National Council for Building a Better Fiji (NCBBF) Technical and Support Secretariat, John Samy, today said during a radio interview that some of the reforms envisaged in the recently unveiled draft Peoples Charter will take up to 12 years to implement. He explained that while some of the proposed reforms are short-term and can be accomplished within two years, others might better be classified as medium-term and longer-term, with the latter taking up to 12 years. Asked about elections, Samy cited his experience as an ADB official in Vietnam for the proposition that "democracy doesn't just mean elections."

¶3. (U) According to both the Charter and the now released State of the Nation and Economy (SNE) Report, a first step in the reform process is the establishment of a "Constitutionally created, independent entity" called the National Peoples Charter Council, "the secretariat of which will be located in the Prime Ministers office and over which, the PM will "play a strong leadership role." Alarming, in addition to implementing reforms set forth in the Charter, the Council is also charged with "proposing new initiatives for implementation that are consistent with Peoples Charter objectives." In addition to indicating that PM Bainimarama will personally direct an open-ended reform program directly from his office, the language also suggests that the IG intends to tackle the thorny constitutional issue first. The Fiji Times reported that during a press conference on Tuesday, when somebody commented that only parliament can change the electoral system, Samy replied "Go do your homework, there are other ways."

¶4. (U) Meanwhile, opposition to the draft Peoples Charter has been prompt and widespread. The SDL, NFP and UPP as well as the Methodist Church have reiterated their opposition to the NCBBF process and the draft Charter it has produced. Various high chiefs have come out against the proposal to confer the title of "Fijian" to all citizens and the autocratic imposition of a new name, "iTaukei," for indigenous Fijians. A number of NGOs and political figures have voiced concern about the Charter's proposals to expand the role of the military in Fiji society. On the other side, and not surprisingly, Finance Minister Mahendra Chaudhry's Fiji Labour Party has signed on to the Charter process. NCBBF touts continue to discuss obtaining the peoples' approval and achieving a political consensus on reform at a "President's Forum" they hope to convene next month with UN and Commonwealth support. However, given the obdurate opposition from the SDL, which won the most parliamentary seats in the 2006 elections, it is unclear how the NCBBF leadership could get any consensus on proposed reforms. Indeed, the "President's Forum" may very well go the way of the promised referendum.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: There are clear contradictions between words and deeds. The IG and now the NCBBF continue to reiterate support for

the 1997 constitution and a desire to have elections. However, the Peoples Charter process has set forth proposals that can only be implemented by amending or abrogating the constitution. Furthermore, the mechanism being promoted for imposing these reforms - the Peoples Charter Council - appears to contemplate an open-ended many-year reform process. End comment.

ROBERTSON